



TESTIMONY OF ERIN O. CROSBY, DIRECTOR OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND RACIAL JUSTICE
OF YWCA GREENWICH, ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF YWCA GREENWICH

TO THE CONNECTICUT GENERAL ASSEMBLY
JOINT COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTIONS

March 11, 2021

Dear Senator Mae Flexer (Co-Chair), Representative Dan Fox (Co-Chair), Senator Rob Sampson (Ranking Member), Representative Gale Mastrofrancesco (Ranking Member), and esteemed members of the Government Administration and Elections (GAE) Committee:

My name is Erin O. Crosby, Director of Women's Empowerment and Racial Justice for the YWCA Greenwich, and I live in Norwalk, Connecticut. Passing HB 6578, but with needed improvement, is extremely important to YWCA Greenwich because expanding and codifying Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to other state agencies is a common-sense reform that saves taxpayer money and helps increase democratic participation.

This bill codifies AVR, as it is happening now at the Department of Motor Vehicles, into state law and we applaud that first step. However, we must also expand AVR to the Department of Social Services (DSS), HUSKY, Access Health CT, state colleges and universities, and other state agencies. According to the Center for American Progress, Connecticut would likely register roughly 245,400 new voters because of this bill. AVR will reduce hours-long election day lines, delays, and barriers to voting by moving registrations online. In addition to ensuring access is not a barrier to full participation in the democratic process, moving from a paper to an electronic method has allowed localities across the country to save an average of about \$3.50 in labor costs per registration.

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) will enhance the security and integrity of our elections by eliminating outdated addresses and duplicative registrations through an automatic process—which will deliver the most accurate voter rolls to cities and towns. Eliminating duplicate registrations significantly reduces the workload for localities that could be susceptible to confusion on election day. While some voters may be given time off by employers to vote, many Connecticut workers arrive early on election day or use their lunch break to vote. Confusion and delays on election day mean voters with limited time may lose their opportunity to vote. Seventy-seven percent of Connecticut voters supported Automatic Voter Registration in a recent Secure Democracy public opinion poll.

Restoring the right to vote to people re-entering their communities on parole is also extremely important to YWCA Greenwich because disenfranchising people on parole sustains a racist system of inequality in our state. Those on parole are concentrated in only a handful of Connecticut communities—those with significant populations of Black and Latinx people.



Connecticut currently incarcerates 8,885 people. While only 12% of our state's population is Black, 42.7% of Connecticut's prisoners are Black and 26.4% are Latinxⁱ. Mass incarceration has led to disproportionate imprisonment of people of color and poor people, and it has uniquely fractured families and communities of color. Restoring voting rights to people on parole is a reparative act that recognizes the debt they have paid, honors their humanity, and acknowledges the many ways our justice system has often been unjust and cruel to People of Color and people living in poverty.

Connecticut has the most stringent criminal disenfranchisement laws in the Northeast and it is the only state in the region that still prohibits those on parole from casting a ballot. Furthermore, felony disenfranchisement laws became widespread in the United States after the Civil War as a way for former Confederate states to circumvent Reconstruction amendments and stamp out Black political power. Twenty (20) states allow people on parole to vote and just two weeks ago New York's state senate voted to restore voting rights to those on parole.

Preventing formerly incarcerated people from voting undermines good-faith attempts at reintegration, and artificially decreases the voting power of the communities in which people on parole reside. In America, 1 in every 16 Black voters is denied the right to vote due to felony disenfranchisement laws versus 1 in every 59 non-Black voters. YWCA Greenwich has recently launched its Center for Equity and Justice, and one of our priorities has been to develop a common language and understanding about race, racism, and antiracism throughout Greenwich. The disenfranchisement we see in Connecticut perpetuated against people on parole reflects a critical aspect of the definition of racism—it denies access, safety, resources, and power based on race categories and produces and reproduces race-based inequitiesⁱⁱ. Restoring voting rights to people on parole moves them from the margins back into the fullness of society.

Lastly, passing SB 1017 is also absolutely necessary so that voters currently qualifying to vote absentee retain the freedom they had in 2020 to use their town's official, secure ballot drop boxes.

We urge you to pass HB 6578 but with an expansion of Automatic Voter Registration beyond the Department of Motor Vehicles to other state agencies—and we urge you to pass SB 1017.

Thank you,

Erin O. Crosby, Director of Women's Empowerment and Racial Justice, YWCA Greenwich
Norwalk, Connecticut

ⁱ Jordan Fenster, "Racial disparities persist in CT prisons, even as the population dropped" (Connecticut: ctpost, 2020) available at <https://www.ctinsider.com/local/ctpost/article/Racial-disparities-persist-in-CT-prisons-even-as-15651213.php>.

ⁱⁱ Center for Racial Justice in Education, "Talking about Race" (New York).